

Newspeak

The world of computers has generated some imaginative language. These 'buzzwords' often have interesting origins

Many of the terms that are used to describe aspects of computing have rather obscure origins. Every trade has its jargon (code words and phrases that are especially used by the people involved in that trade), and none more so than the computer industry. In fact, computer people even have a jargon word for their jargon: they call them 'buzzwords'.

BUZZWORDS

The word **BUZZWORD** first surfaced in the late 1960's, when someone in Honeywell's publicity department developed a game called a 'Buzzword Generator'. The game was centred on three columns of ten words each, numbered 0-9. The first column contained adjectives, and the other columns consisted of nouns that could stand in apposition. You simply thought of a three figure number, looked up the appropriate words, and there you had an utterly meaningless phrase, such as 'interactive system module'. This could then be used to pepper conversation with your friends and colleagues, in order to baffle and confuse them.

BOOT

BOOT is a contraction of bootstrap: as in 'to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps'. A bootstrap loader is a routine that is automatically run whenever a computer is powered-up (N.B. for the dedicated computer user, it's not sufficient to say 'switched on'). In machines that do not have an operating system in ROM, the boot routine must contain instructions to call in that operating system from disk, or else the machine could not be used.

BIT

BIT is a buzzword in its own right. Though most dictionaries declare it to be a contraction of '**B**inary **digiT**', it seems equally likely that it is just an extension of its common meaning: 'a small piece of something'. It's worth bearing in mind, though, that in American slang a bit is also an eighth part of a dollar, and is always spoken of in twos: 'two bits', for example, is a quarter - 25 cents.

Bit often appears as a prefix: as in 'bit-slicing', a term used to explain how certain rather sophisticated microprocessors can be constructed out of two, four, or eight-bit 'building blocks', resulting in devices with capacities as large as 32 bits. Computing wisdom has it that programs left unused for a long time will develop additional and unsolvable bugs, and this imaginary phenomenon is referred to as 'bit-decay'.

TURNKEY

When it comes to people greeting their computer system, perhaps for the first time, yet another jargon word has evolved. Many commercial organisations employ a firm of computer consultants to install hardware and software so that the client can take it over in working order. This is known as **TURNKEY** operation, because all the client has to do is turn the key and drive away.

BASIC

BASIC itself is a buzzword, standing for **B**eginners' **A**ll-purpose **S**ymbolic **I**nstruction **C**ode; though, as with so many acronyms, one suspects that the word was thought of before the phrase.

HARDWARE

SOFTWARE

HARDWARE and **SOFTWARE** are in themselves buzzwords ('hard' meaning tangible and 'soft' the opposite), but there are two other types of 'ware' as well. **FIRMWARE** meaning software that is encapsulated in hardware (such as in the ROM or EPROM), and **LIVEWARE**, which refers to all those people fortunate enough to work with and use computers!

BAUD

BAUD - the rate at which data is transmitted - is named after Emile Baudot, the inventor of a telegraphic code that initially rivalled the more successful one devised by Samuel Morse.